

The Earth First!

[Tom Fitzpatrick](#) June 7, 1989

All four prisoners shuffled into the courtroom as though headed for the scaffold. They were handcuffed. They wore the baggy blue jail uniforms that make everyone appear guilty until proven innocent. None of the four could manage a smile. They were escorted to the defense table with the same caution that might have been directed to a quartet of Iranian hijackers.

Their avowed goal as members of a group called Earth First! was to save the environment. But now they were accused of a plot that might have caused a "China syndrome" at the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station.

Two of the men wore beards. The third sported an ample mustache.

Margaret Millett, 35, the lone woman member, wore glasses with plastic frames. Her hair was down over her shoulder in a long braid. Millett looked more like a librarian at the reference desk than a saboteur.

As members of Earth First!, they are spiritual descendants of writer Edward Abbey. Abbey inspired Earth First! in its environmentalist ways with his novels, such as *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and essay collections, such as *Desert Solitaire*.

When Abbey died this past March, he was 62. He'd had five wives and five children. He was a wonderfully humorous, combative and articulate writer.

Taking it in alphabetical order, Abbey disdained authority, automobiles, bureaucrats, cities, developers . . . The list goes on.

All through his writing career, Abbey, too, urged the preservation of the desert and trees and streams.

He was adamantly opposed to things like importing water to Phoenix merely for the sake of increasing population:

"They cannot see," he wrote once, "that growth just for the sake of growth is a cancerous madness, that Phoenix . . . will not be a better city to live in when the population doubles again and again. They would never understand that an economic system which can only expand or expire must be false to all that is human."

Abbey was a stranger to the lust for money. Having written a memorable novel called *The Brave Cowboy*, he sold it for just \$7,500 to Kirk Douglas, a businessman-actor who changed the name to *Lonely Are the Brave* and created from it one of the great cult movies.

The Monkey Wrench Gang, written in 1975, has sold better than 500,000 copies. *Desert Solitaire*, written in 1968, has gone through eighteen printings.

But none of this changed Abbey's lifestyle.

It was Abbey's book that inspired David Foreman, one of the defendants. Before returning to Tucson he worked in Washington, D.C., as a lobbyist for the Wilderness Society.

Foreman was a close friend of Abbey's. He is the author of a book called Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkey Wrenching. Some think that he is the model for one of Abbey's most famous fictional characters.

Foreman's book contains diagrams of ways to cut down power transformers and techniques to bedevil those who would reduce the natural environment.

It is an extension of Abbey's fictional plan to blow up Glen Canyon Dam in The Monkey Wrench Gang.

Foreman's book gave him the credentials to be a leader in the movement.

But now, in this federal courtroom this provided no consolation for Foreman. He was a prisoner.

Just minutes away, the ultimate city madness of the Iceberg Phoenix Grand Prix was going through its preliminary paces.

Even now, as the court hearing moved ahead, the Formula One racing cars roared and squealed around and around in a kind of rat's maze.

The race promoters had promised Mayor Terry Goddard this would give two-hundred million people the world over a chance to see downtown Phoenix.

What they did not warn Goddard was that the views of Phoenix would turn out to be so devastating. Anyone sitting in London, Paris or even Beirut who saw the Grand Prix on television would make an immediate mental note to avoid setting foot in such a place.

The race proved the ultimate bad joke. The gullible Phoenix City Council was victimized by the race's slick promoters. But we were all taken advantage of by our own elected officials. Oh, well. What else is new?

They squandered millions of taxpayers' money on an event that proved an international insult.

It was a race that people on the streets could hear as far north as Osborn and as far south as Broadway. But they weren't allowed even to get a passing glance at the cars without paying an exorbitant admission fee.

In fact, the most clever engineering feat of the week was that the promoters created enough walls and sharp curves to make it impossible for anyone to get a good look at the race course--including those who had paid top dollar.

But Abbey's disciples weren't concerned about the car race. They were prisoners in the dock and things kept getting darker all the time.

For them, this was decidedly not a literary setting.

Roger Dokken, the prosecutor from the U.S. Attorney's Office, is one of those thin, tightly wrapped lawyers who operates on the far edge of apoplexy. Dokken kept insisting to U.S. Magistrate Morton Sitver that the Earth First! group might easily have caused a China syndrome at the Palo Verde.

They don't have a prayer, I thought. Magistrate Sitver seemed impressed by Dokken's rhetoric.

But the hearing dragged on more than three hours.

Through most of it, FBI agent Lori Bailey was on the witness stand.

She testified that undercover agent Michael Tait had infiltrated Earth First!. He gained members' confidence and was able to record secretly 35 separate tapes of their conversations.

It is from these tapes, the FBI says, it learned of the Earth First! plans to damage Palo Verde and the Central Arizona Project.

Since the undercover agent was involved in the plans from day-to-day, the FBI was waiting at the scene when the group attempted to destroy a tower carrying power from Palo Verde to the Central Arizona Project.

It must have been quite a scene. The FBI, according to reports, brought forty agents and more than a dozen vehicles. Some carried automatic weapons. A few had night-vision field glasses. There was even a helicopter.

The Earth First! members weren't even armed. Since the undercover man was in on the planning of the Earth First! raid, the FBI had to know this going in. And there were just three of them. Marc Baker, Mark Davis, and Margaret Millett, all Prescott residents.

Foreman allegedly supplied \$580 for the operation. But he was against taking part and remained in Tucson.

The two men in the operation, Davis and Baker, wore towels wrapped around their feet to prevent their footprints from being identified. This precaution, of course, gave them no chance to escape on foot.

Millett took no such precaution. So she managed to escape. She made her way through the woods to the highway and then walked back to Prescott. She was arrested the following day while working at her job in the Planned Parenthood clinic.

If this all sounds more to you like the gang that couldn't shoot straight rather than a legitimate terrorist cell, then you are beginning to get the idea.

However, if the case goes to trial and prosecutor Dokken is allowed to spout off about the China syndrome, it will turn out badly. A jury, reacting to memories of Three Mile Island and Chernobyl, might side readily with the prosecution. It was a strange hearing and it lasted three hours. It was marked only by memorable small incidents.

The marshals were particularly grim-faced and self-righteous throughout. They made a great show of serious police work as they directed the prisoners to the defense table. They also turned the removal of the handcuffs into a ceremony.

"We'll need this front row," one of the marshals growled, looking around pointedly at the spectators already seated in that row.

It wasn't until this moment that I realized the audience was made up mostly of Foreman's followers and the friends and relatives of the other defendants, who all lived in Prescott.

Perhaps the marshal was a devotee of John Wayne Westerns. But, of course, this little piece of business was also an amplification of the prosecutor's thesis: We have criminals of intergalactic status here. They must be heavily guarded or else the entire citizenry is at risk.

The government's case came only through the testimony of FBI agent Bailey. The undercover man who infiltrated the group was not brought into court.

He succeeded, we were told, in creating 35 tapes which the government contends will be an important part of the case.

The confrontation with the informer will be saved for the trial. But the undercover man had been debriefed by agent Bailey and she merely recounted his story.

Bailey said the group admitted they had vandalized transmission towers at Palo Verde in 1986 and the ski-lift towers at Fairfield Snowbowl outside Flagstaff. They also downed electrical lines to three uranium mines near Grand Canyon National Park.

This was done, Bailey testified, by the group of three from Prescott: Davis, Millett, and Baker, who call themselves EMETIC. This stands for the Ev Mecham Eco-Terrorist International Conspiracy. I thought it was a nice journalistic gaucherie on the part of the Arizona Republic to give former Governor Mecham an opportunity to say he was innocent of consorting with this group.

Agent Bailey said one thing that should be taken and studied by the people who run the Department of Defense in Washington at a cost of billions.

Foreman reportedly gave the EMETIC group \$580 to finance the sabotaging not only of Palo Verde but also of the Diablo Canyon Nuclear Generating Station near San Luis Obispo, California, and the Rocky Flats nuclear-weapons plant near Boulder, Colorado.

If Foreman and EMETIC can get all these things done for as little as \$580, the charges against them should be dropped at once. The four of them should immediately be recruited by the government to run the Pentagon.

What would Abbey think of all this?

He would at first roar with laughter. Then he would grow outraged at the stupidity of the FBI and the bureaucrats who run the federal building in Phoenix as if it were their own private club.

Nothing can tell us more about a man than the way he chooses to die. Edward Hoagland told of Abbey's death in a piece written for the New York Times Book Review.

Abbey was given only a few weeks' notice that he was about to die from a circulatory disorder that caused internal bleeding.

Abbey wanted to meet death in the desert. So he had himself disconnected from the hospital tubes. His wife, Clarke, and three friends drove him to a spot in the desert. They built a final campfire for Abbey to look at. When he felt he was about to die, Abbey crawled into his sleeping bag. His wife went with him.

But he didn't die. So they brought him back to his writing cabin and placed him on a mattress. It was there that Abbey said his farewells.

The friend, who was the model for G.W. Hayduke in The Monkey Wrench Gang was with Abbey in his final minutes. "Hayduke," according to Hoagland, "is now actually a legend in his own right, a sort of contemporary mountain man who returned to the Tucson area several years ago."

It is said that Abbey smiled when Hayduke told him they would bury him according to Abbey's written instructions.

So Abbey's body was "transported in the bed of a pickup truck" out into the desert. He was buried, wrapped in his sleeping bag in a spot where the grave would never be found.

Abbey said one final thing to his friends before he died:

"I've done what I could," he said. "I'm ready."

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